

God's Initiative in You



PART ONE

October 30, 1998

Thrust Statement: Man's salvation is God's creation.

Scripture Reading:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose ([Philippians 2:12-13](#)).

This passage is a puzzle to many Christians. On the one hand, Paul says, "work out your own salvation"; but, on the other hand, he says, "it is God who works in you." Which is it? Is it both? Does man earn his salvation? Or is salvation God's initiative? These are questions that this study seeks to unravel. Just what is Paul saying to the Philippians? In the above Scripture reading, Paul brings us face to face with the practical questions of the Christian life. In other words, he is saying that one should work out his salvation to the finish—do not give up, do not faint, do not become discouraged. This passage is not a reference to one's attempt to earn one's salvation by works, but rather a reference to spiritual growth and development.

Salvation expresses itself in the ongoing process in which the believer is involved.

This passage (**Philippians 2:12-13**) brings us to the very heart of the most practical questions that confront each Christian in his or her walk with the Lord. But before one embarks upon a detailed study of the implications of this Scripture, it would be helpful to look at this exhortation as a whole before one analyzes its component parts. To begin with, one's attention should focus upon the word "therefore" ({Wste }) at the beginning of this verse (**12**). This word compels us to take this statement ("work out your own salvation with fear and trembling") within its context; the word "therefore" links this verse with the preceding verses, that is to say, what has gone before.

Paul appealed to the Philippians to live a life of holiness, to live a life of love, to live a life of forbearance, and to live a life of faithfulness to God—come what may. Paul wanted their conduct to be in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Messiah:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you (**Philippians 1:27-28a**).

Not only does the "therefore" take us back to **1:27**, but it also takes us back to where Paul exhorts the Philippians to "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (**Philippians 2:3**). Paul relies upon the incarnation and resurrection of Christ to drive home his point of humility. He forcefully illustrates this:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (**Philippians 2:5-8**).

This example of Christ's humility furnishes a lesson for Christian unity. This deep love is the bond that binds the people of God. It is this model of unselfishness that causes God's children to labor toward the advancement of the Lord's kingdom on earth. Remember, Jesus expresses this kind of love to His disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (**John 13:34-35**). It is this self-sacrificing love that induces Christians to make allowances for other believers. It is this extreme love that exhibits patience, toleration, and forgiveness. As the Philippians work out their salvation, it is to be done without discord or pomp. This admonition is as true today as it was in Paul's letter. As we, at Oakwood Hills Church of Christ, work out our salvation, it is my prayer that none of us will battle with one another. Yes, Paul is encouraging these Christians toward love. He loves them and they love him. It is very possible that they are discouraged by the fact that

Paul is jailed in Rome. One wonders if the Philippians were saying within themselves, "without Paul we cannot live this Christian life."

It appears from the tone of the letter that Paul is saying, "Please don't imagine that my presence or my freedom is essential to your living the Christian life. Through the mercy of God, I proclaimed to you the gospel. God, in His infinite wisdom, allowed me to set you on your feet and, in a sense, establish your goings. You must not feel that everything is going down the tube; you must not feel that the work in Philippi is about to end because I am in prison and cannot come and proclaim the gospel to you." What about us at Oakwood Hills? Do the believers here also relate to the inner feelings of the Philippians? When Bob Lewis announced his departure, did any of you want to quit? Were you despondent? Can you identify with the Philippians? Are you experiencing turmoil within your soul?

Who is Bob Lewis, who is Dallas Burdette, who is Will Oldfield, who is Dennis Smith, who is James Hagan, who is James Hayes, who is James Ingle, and who is Tom Smith but servants of God. It is in this vein that Paul addresses the Corinthians:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds (**1 Corinthians 3:5-10**).

Bob Lewis built upon the foundation laid by someone else; Dallas Burdette is building upon the groundwork laid by someone else. Bob and I have one purpose; namely, to build upon the company of God's saints; it is God who gives the increase. Paul forcefully reminds the Philippians that it is not his presence that is essential; rather, it is God's closeness that is indispensable. For Paul, the One who is really necessary is God; the One who is important to you is with you. He wants them to understand that it is God who works in them, not Paul. Listen again to the words of Paul, "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (**Philippians 2:13**). It is not Paul, but God that matters; it is not Bob Lewis, but God that matters; it is not Dallas Burdette, but God that matters. To the Philippians, he is saying in essence, "you must not feel that your labor in the Lord is for nothing." This admonition is also applicable to the saints at Oakwood Hills. The words of Paul to the Corinthian congregation are worth citing: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Everyone here is a minister of God. Everyone here is a servant of God. Everyone here is a minister of the proclamation of the good news of God. Everyone is to be actively engaged in kingdom work. Paul reminds the Corinthians as to what it is all about:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to

himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (**2 Corinthians 5:17-21**).

God has committed to all of us this ministry of reconciliation. In the course of history, there have been times when all leaders were killed or destroyed. But since Christianity is about the love of God within the soul, it has continued. Christianity is a personal possession of every true believer. My prayer is that God will continue to work in each of you. Do you remember how Paul began his letter to the Philippians? Listen as we read about his thanksgiving and prayer:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (**Philippians 1:3-11**).

Salvation is a personal possession. In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul was not exhorting the Christians in Philippi to produce their own salvation, or to arrive at salvation, but rather to work the salvation that they already possessed through faith in Jesus. The New Testament writers never present salvation as something that individuals achieve through their own efforts, their own strivings, and their own endeavor. No! "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (**Philippians 2:13**). The writers of the New Testament talk about justification, sanctification, and glorification.

In closing this message, let me briefly set forth, what I consider, the major distinctions in these three words. First, when one is justified, God regards that one as guiltless; He forgives them in Christ; they are justified by faith. Justification is God clothing us with the righteousness of Jesus Messiah. Second, sanctification is that process which is going on within us; it is that which makes us more like Christ. Sanctification is continuous, whereas justification is God once and for all regarding us as sinless. Sanctification is Christ being formed within us; in other words, our nature is being purged and purified and cleansed and perfected. Sanctification is something in which you and I are active. Yes, Christians are to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (**Philippians 2:12**). Are you aware that God is working in you? Thank God for such a doctrine that assures us that in spite of all our sins and all of our unworthiness, God is still fashioning our lives. And, finally, glorification is the state beyond this life where the believer will stand with a perfect resurrection body face to face with God.

**Message Delivered
at the Following
Congregations**

**Oakwood Hills Church of Christ
DeFuniak Springs, FL
November 1, 1998
11 am**